COUNTRY REPORT:

Philippines

Family, Faith, and Fiesta: Social Life in the Philippines

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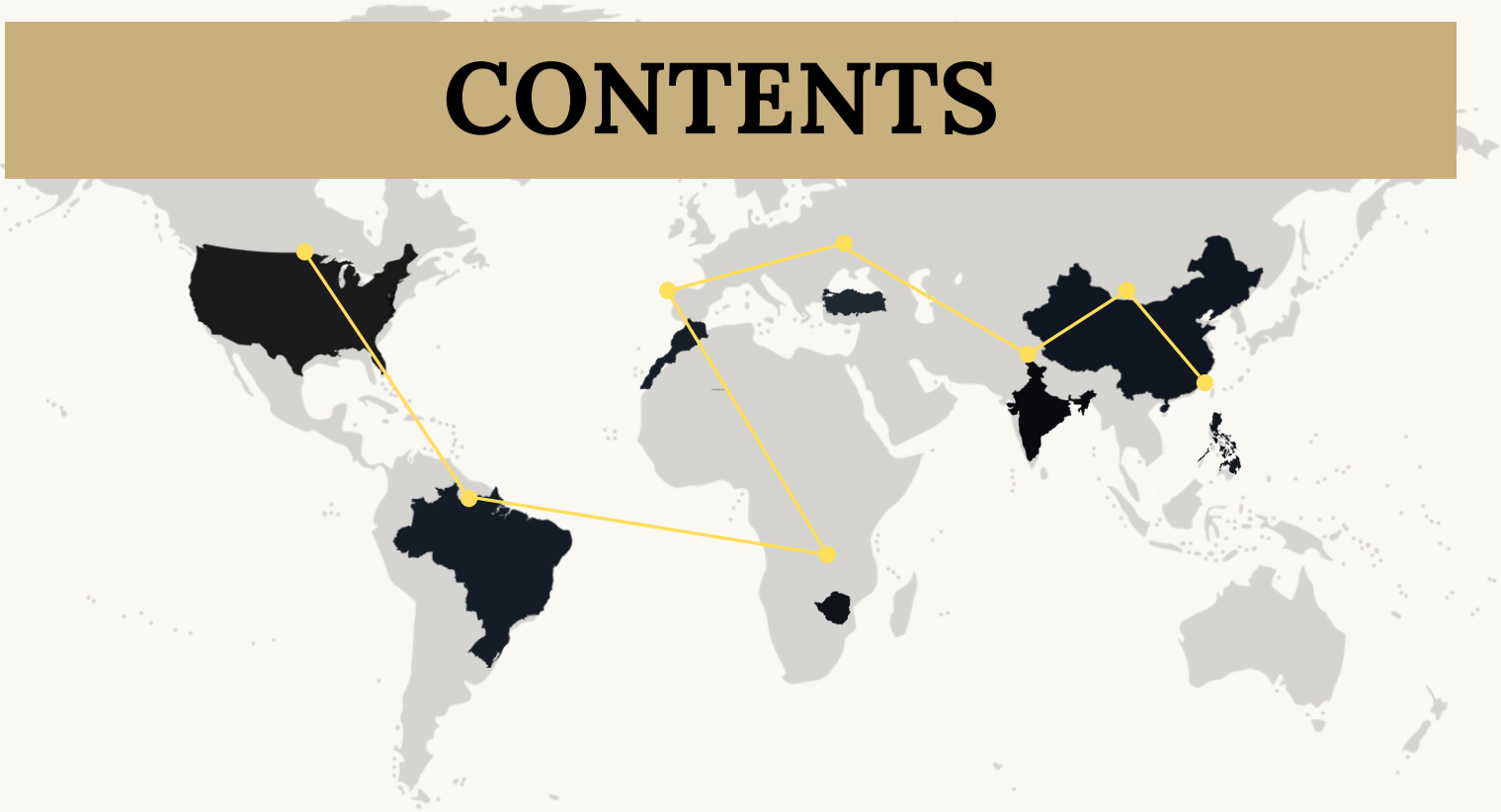

A Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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1. Summary Report

"Disconnection is the unwillingness to connect and connect anymore. Loneliness is invisible... we are good at hiding loneliness."

- participant from the Philippines

Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-country qualitative study examining how people across diverse cultural settings conceptualize and experience social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The project engages with eight countries: Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

The goal is to provide actionable insights for monitoring and intervention for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by highlighting both universal and culture-specific dimensions of social connection, disconnection and loneliness.

In the Philippines, social life is anchored in family, faith, and communal practices, but these same structures can create strain. Connection is often defined through interaction and responsibility, while belonging is understood through experiences of authenticity and acceptance. Loneliness is heavily stigmatized, often masked by outward cheerfulness, making it harder to detect in public life.

Methodology

The study employed a stratified sampling design and recruited 354 participants aged 18 and older across eight countries. Stratification included age, gender, income, partnership status, loneliness severity, urban/rural residence, and region. Recruitment followed a drift sampling strategy, combining targeted outreach with participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours each) explored the individual's social map, functions of their social connections, definition and experiences of social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The interview included a meta-cognitive portion where individuals reflected on how and why they have provided the answers that they have given. Data were then transcribed, translated into English, and de-identified. Country teams conducted inductive coding before iteratively synthesizing results into a shared framework. Thematic coding was supported by qualitative analysis tools (Quirkos, NVivo, Google Sheets).

Analytic Approach

For each interview the whole transcript was first mapped to an analysis summary sheet which summarizes all sections of the interview. Information from these summary sheets were then aggregated together to form the evidence table. Concurrently, each transcript was subjected to a selective line-by-line coding focusing on how individuals experience and conceptualize social connection (including how individuals define social connection, how they characterize good and deficient social connections, and how they define belonging); as well as how they experience and conceptualize disconnection and loneliness (including how the individuals experience and define disconnection, experience and define loneliness, and whether make the a distinction between loneliness and solitude).

For the line-by-line coding, country leads initially inductively coded manuscripts independently of the rest of the team. The codes that were developed then reflected culturally applicable elements. Codes from across all countries were then collated and synthesized, and overlapping or similar codes were integrated.

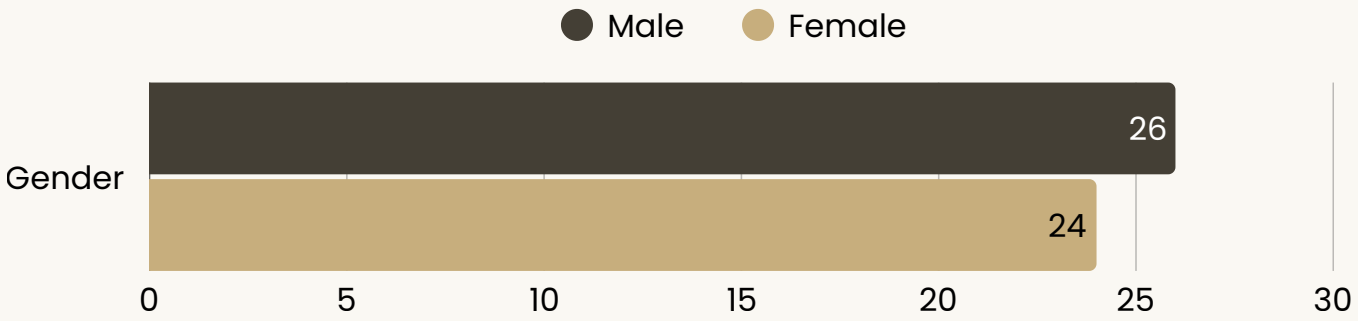
This synthesis provided the coding framework, which the research team then applied to the full set of transcripts.

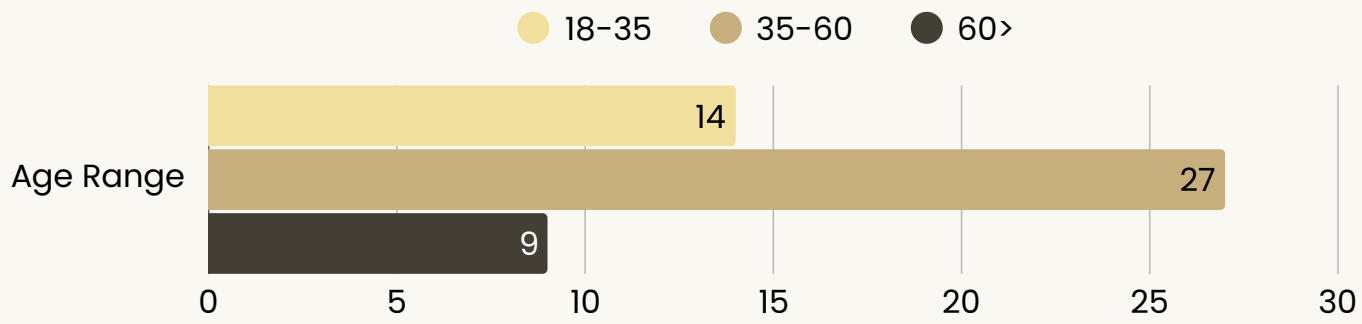
For example, the code [Emotional depth / superficiality] were used for responses that indicate the depth or superficiality of the emotional connection such as when one participant mentioned "People could be extroverted but still lonely if they don't really connect on a deeper level." Codes are not mutually exclusive, and transcript portions can be coded with multiple applicable codes

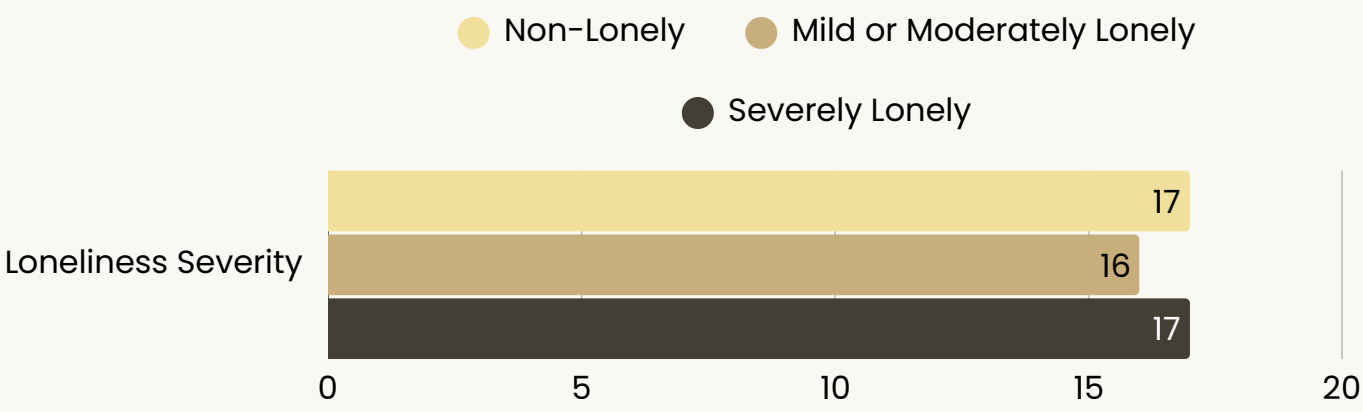
Codes were clustered as to whether they referred to the characterization of the relationship (e.g., "closeness/depth", "duration"), the interaction (e.g., "frequency of interaction", "reciprocity of interaction"), the function of the interaction (e.g., "instrumental support", "emotional support"), the perceived characteristics of the other (e.g., "availability", "trustworthiness"), or one's self state (e.g., "satisfaction", "obligation") . The full list of codes can be found in the project OSF. The team met weekly to refine the codes, clarifying provisional definitions and applicability of the codes to instances in the data.

Sample Demographics Overview

Participant Profile Summary
👤 Total Sample: 50







*Loneliness severity was determined using a single item from the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D): *"During the past week, have you felt lonely?"* Responses were categorized as: Non-lonely: ≤1 day, Mild/Moderate: 1–4 days, Severe: 5–7 days.

Summary of Select Findings

Key Social Categories

Family is the foundation of Filipino social life, providing both emotional grounding and material support. Friends and peers, particularly among younger adults, are crucial for wellness and crisis support. Religious communities remain central across generations, while colleagues, pets, music, and even customers supplement connection in everyday life.

Challenges and Quality of Connection

Connection is not always positive: caregiving responsibilities often feel overwhelming for younger members, and generational conflicts or perceived emotional invalidation can erode closeness. Good connections were described as rooted in consistent communication, trust, and reciprocity, while deficient ties left individuals feeling unseen or drained. "I'm so tired, I'm carrying everything," said one young participant, capturing the weight of obligation that often accompanies close ties.

Definitions of Connection and Belonging

For Filipinos, connection is enacted through active interaction—talking, spending time, and checking in—whereas belonging was typically understood through experiences of authenticity and acceptance:

> **"When you truly belong, you don't have to pretend... you just have to be yourself."**
> **- participant from the Philippines**

Cultural Specificity

Social life is strongly shaped by *pakikipagkapwa* (relating to others) and *bayanihan* (communal unity). Rituals such as KBL—*kasal, binyag, libing* (weddings, baptisms, funerals) and fiestas serve as anchors of belonging. Food, shared meals, and religious practice reinforce community, even as cultural norms encourage masking loneliness with cheerfulness.

Disconnection and Loneliness

Disconnection was often experienced as emotional absence rather than explicit rejection or conflict. Loneliness, in contrast, was typically embodied—described as sadness, heaviness, and yearning, sometimes masked under outward positivity.

Summary of Select Findings

Implications

Measurement of social connection and disconnection in the Philippines would benefit from capturing the burdens of caregiving and the protective role of faith and community. Addressing stigma and cultural norms that discourage open discussion of loneliness will be essential for effective policy and intervention.

Summary of Research Questions

This study was guided by a shared analytic framework and research questions* across eight participating countries:

SOCIAL MAPPING

- What are common social categories among the target population?
- What are common challenges/burdens of social connection among the target population?

SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Definition of social connection: how does the target population define social connection?
- Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection: what makes for a good social connection for the target population?
- Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of social connection among the target population?
- What else does the target population feel connected to?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS

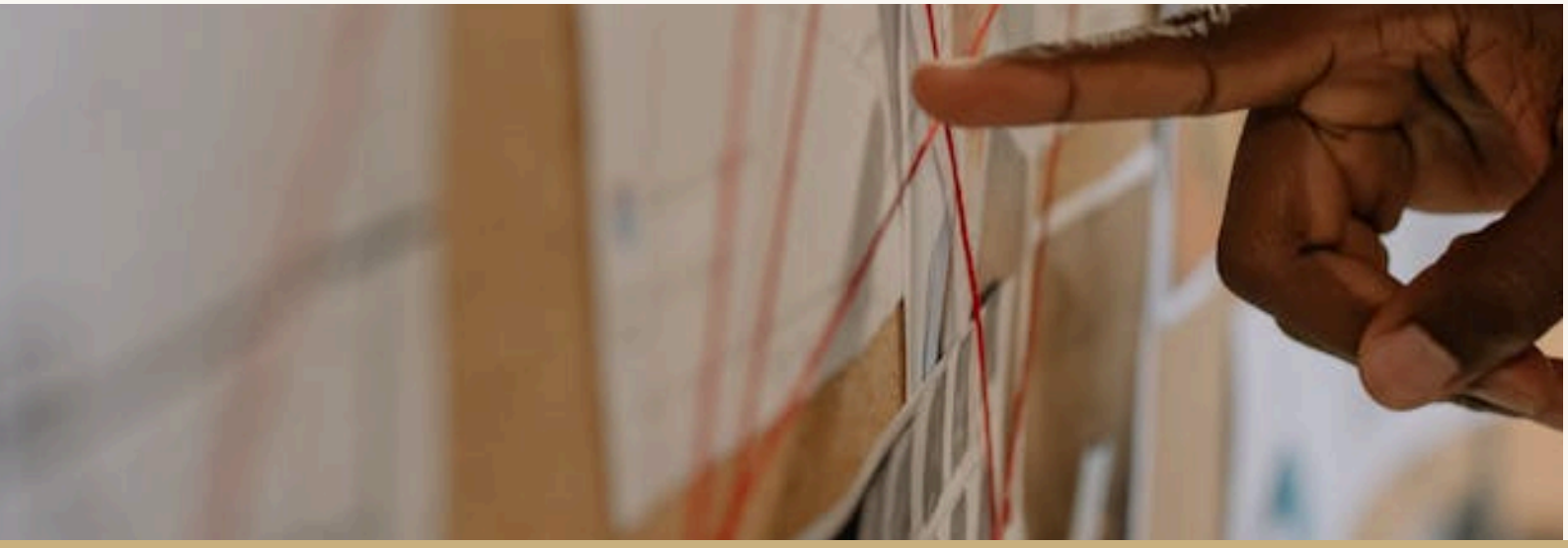
- Experiences of disconnection: What are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?
- Definition of disconnection: How do the target population define disconnection?
- Experiences of loneliness: What are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?
- What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?
- What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?
- How does the target population cope with loneliness?
- What factors affects loneliness for the target population?
- Definition of loneliness: How do the target population define and explain loneliness?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS *(continued)*

- How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?
- Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

META-COGNITION

- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them
- What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of “I feel lonely” from 0-100



Summary of Project Resources

Project OSF

This project's materials are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/p3msu, to ensure transparency, and accessibility.

- **Interview Guide:** A copy of the interview guide containing the questions asked across 8 countries
- **Deidentified Transcripts:** Interview transcripts (anonymized) from all participating countries
- **Ethics:** Documentation of institutional ethics approvals, consent processes, and ethical safeguards
- **Evidence Tables:** Verbatim transcript portions and summarized information per participant across different research questions
- **Codebook:** The codebook contains the codes, provisional code definitions and transcript portion examples across different research questions
- **Country Reports:** Country reports from the analysis of within-country data in Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.
- **Main Publication:** Pre-print of the publication that features the cross-country comparisons across the global project.

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2. Analysis Report

"To belong means to feel at home. You know you're different, but you don't feel different."

- participant from the Philippines

Common social categories

Among Filipino participants, family consistently emerged as the most foundational social category, deeply intertwined with emotional, instrumental, and informational forms of support. Many participants—especially those in intergenerational households—described family members as central to daily routines and decision-making, with caregiving and financial responsibility often flowing bidirectionally (e.g., ID31 helps his father with dialysis). Across these interactions, family was commonly tied to instrumental support (e.g., caregiving, money), informational support (e.g., advice), emotional support, and affirmation of esteem. Friends, especially among younger and middle-aged participants (e.g., ID10, ID13, ID16), were typically valued for emotional support, experience-sharing, and esteem, while emphasizing the role of friends in sustaining emotional wellness and offering informational support during crises.

In contrast, work colleagues were widely referenced but largely characterized as offering functional or informational support rather than deep emotional intimacy. While some participants—particularly younger workers—acknowledged occasional camaraderie, the prevailing sentiment was that emotional connection in work contexts is rare or superficial, with limited effects on self-esteem or satisfaction. Religious and spiritual communities were also among the most commonly cited social categories across participants. This category is especially pronounced among older and female participants, where church-based activities such as Bible studies, choirs, and outreach programs serve as both emotional lifelines and spaces of belonging (e.g., ID50, 48, 42, 10, 18). One participant finds connection through prayer requests and sisterhood (ID50). While another participant emphasized that "It felt really good to share insights about the word of God, and to hear about what others are going through and how their faith strengthens them. It's like you're not alone—

everyone's going through something, but you support each other spiritually. "So yes, it's really about faith and spirituality," describing how Bible studies and outreach help her feel seen and connected (ID48). She even added, "My friends feel like family. Especially in church, we're like family." Unique categories such as customers (ID6) or pets (ID19) also contributed to emotional fulfillment, often compensating for absent human connection.

Common challenges/burdens of social connection

Filipino participants described several burdens that make sustaining social connection difficult, with misunderstandings, perceived emotional invalidation, and role-based strain appearing as the most common challenges (e.g., ID32, 38, 15). For instance, one participant noted, "As the youngest, they always call me for decisions or whenever they need something. I'm so tired, I'm carrying everything." (ID32). While another participant shared her feelings of invalidation, saying, "It's like you're being ignored … Like, you're not included in things or decisions where you should be." (ID38). Many participants shared that even within households or among close relatives, communication breakdowns and unresolved tensions limit emotional closeness. One participant shared, "For the past 2 years it's been a tough relationship with my family … it's just really being a tough connecting with my family. We don't really talk about our deep emotions, or we just burst out." (ID15). In some cases, misunderstandings arose from generational gaps, where values and priorities differed, but there was no space to bridge those differences. One participant in her teenage years shared her family relationship, "I mean, yes, we are family, and people say family should always come first. But at the same time, we have a lot of conflicts—small things often turn into big issues. This creates a huge gap in our relationship and weakens our bond as a family." (ID18).

Definition of social connection

In the Philippines, social connection is most commonly defined through interpersonal interaction and embedded social roles, rather than internal emotional states or abstract notions of belonging. The most frequently used code under Definition of Social Connection is "Interaction" under Characterization of Interactions, with multiple participants describing social connection as something demonstrated by talking, checking in, spending time together, and being physically or emotionally present. As such, participants expressed definitions like: "Social connection, for me, is about interacting and communicating with others—engaging in conversations, spending time together, and making an effort to maintain relationships. " (ID14), "Social Structure" under Characterization of Relationship is also a prominently used code, suggesting that participants associate connection with their roles in enduring systems such as families, church communities, or lifelong friendships (e.g., ID14, 24, 29, 34).

In contrast, several codes typically associated with more affective or internal dimensions—such as "Sense of Belonging (to a person)," "Frequency of Interaction," "Duration of Relationship," and "Not Feeling Left Out"—were not coded at all, implying that while these may be implicitly important, they are not explicitly invoked by participants when asked to define connection. Emotional and functional dimensions—like "Emotional Support," "General Support," "Disclosure of Emotions," and "Socialization"—were present but relatively less frequently mentioned. Additionally, "Trust" and "Being Heard" were coded only once, which indicates that although valued, these are not central to how social connection is initially conceptualized by most participants.

Characteristics of good and deficient social connections

The characteristics of a good and deficient social connection among Filipinos can be best understood through an interplay of frequent interaction, emotional safety, trust, reciprocity, and effort. Interaction emerged as central, underscoring that social connection is understood foremost as something actively nurtured through time and communication. As such, one participant mentioned, "Consistent communication is vital" (ID14), while another explained, "For me, maintaining social connections means checking in on the person regularly—not necessarily every day, but at least from time to time" (ID18). Another participant reflected, "Communication is deep for me. It's like the beginning of everything" (ID3), emphasizing how ongoing, even simple exchanges, signal connection. Complementing this, the importance of emotional availability and effort is reflected in how participants described being present and responsive. As such, one participant shared (ID24), "If a friend suddenly messages me, asking to grab coffee, that's okay with me. That's one of my ways of showing care… I give my time and say, 'Okay, I'll listen to you", capturing how everyday gestures anchor social bonds.

While ideal connections involve warmth and openness, participants also acknowledged that conflict is part of any relationship. However, the ability to navigate and resolve tensions was repeatedly cited as a hallmark of strong relationships. One participant shared, "Nothing is perfect. One challenge is that some family members aren't always open to listening… but we eventually resolve them" (ID10), echoing the value placed on pagpapatawad (forgiveness) and conflict resolution.

Additionally, participants expressed that good social ties are multidimensional, offering both emotional encouragement and practical help. Even small gestures—like giving advice or assistance in times of need—signaled strength and reliability in relationships. Participants also

emphasized the value of shared interests and ease, describing how enjoying time together in simple, everyday ways helped sustain emotional closeness. In contrast, weaker or deficient relationships were described as one-sided, draining, or performative. Some participants reflected on times they felt used or emotionally burdened, particularly when expected to maintain ties that no longer felt meaningful. One participant shared, “Sometimes, I feel like people only come to me when they need something” (ID19), while another stated, “I realized that people only stick around when you have something to offer. Once you don’t, they act like they don’t know you” (ID3).

Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?

Filipino participants define belonging primarily through internal emotional states and affective interpersonal experiences, rather than institutional or structural affiliations. The most frequent codes used for belonging were "General feelings of belonging/inclusion" and "Authenticity/Acceptance of self" highlighting that belonging is deeply tied to being accepted as one's true self and feeling included in a nonjudgmental environment. As such, one participant shared, "When you truly belong, you don't have to pretend or act a certain way—you just have to be yourself. And you know that the people around you will accept you for who you are" (ID19). Another affirmed, "Belonging means acceptance. It's when you are welcomed as you are, regardless of where you come from, your background, or your identity" (ID20), echoed almost word-for-word by ID35. Codes like "Valued/Appreciated," "Comfort," "Satisfaction/Positive Affect," and "Emotional Connection/Bond" were also present, though to a lesser degree, reinforcing that belonging is rooted in emotional validation, personal comfort, and relational closeness. A few participants also expressed belonging through connections to Religion/God, Nature, or Pets, showing culturally specific sources of symbolic belonging (ID21, 37, 50, 16, 18, 19, 21). Meanwhile, other expected indicators from the full global coding framework, such as "Love and Affection," "Shared Characteristics," "Alignment of Goals," "Emotional Depth/Superficiality," and "Group Cohesion," had zero or no

coding, suggesting these are not explicitly named when describing belonging, even if they may underlie participants' experiences. The notable absence of codes related to frequency of interaction, institutional roles, or formal membership implies that belonging in this context is felt rather than functionally defined. Belonging is thus conceptualized as a psychosocial experience of recognition, comfort, and authenticity in emotionally safe spaces, not merely in proximity or participation.

What are culture-specific aspects of social connection?

Social connection in the Philippines is deeply embedded in cultural values of *pakikipagkapwa* (relating to others), *bayanihan* (communal unity), and an emphasis on extended familial and community ties. Participants described uniquely Filipino ways of connecting, such as gathering during "*KBL*" (*kasal, binyag, libing*—weddings, baptisms, and funerals), which serve as important social occasions to maintain relationships despite physical distance or infrequent communication. These gatherings symbolize a cyclical reconnection rooted in shared life events. Food and communal meals were also frequently cited as central to Filipino bonding, highlighting how "talking and eating together" facilitates meaningful interaction. Additionally, religiosity and involvement in church activities emerged as salient sources of social connection, particularly among older adults who actively participate in choir, Bible study, and charity outreach as acts of spiritual and social solidarity. Among Filipino participants, culture-specific aspects of social connection are deeply shaped by collectivist norms, religious traditions, and a strong emphasis on familial and communal ties. Many described uniquely Filipino social rituals such as fiestas, reunions, and communal religious activities as primary avenues for bonding, even with distant acquaintances or strangers.

What else does the target population feel connected to?

In addition to family, friends, and faith communities, several Filipino participants reported feeling connected to music, pets, and nature as meaningful sources of comfort and identity (ID21, 37, 50, 16, 18, 19, 21). For instance, one participant described how music serves as both an emotional outlet and a form of connection, especially when experiencing loneliness or anxiety. Pets were also mentioned by younger participants as nonjudgmental companions who provide a stable presence during emotionally difficult times. Nature emerged as another significant referent; In such cases, music, animals, and nature provide an alternative relational space that fosters emotional regulation and a sense of continuity. These referents were often framed as more reliable or emotionally safe than people, particularly when participants experienced disconnection from their immediate social circles.

Experiences of disconnection

Disconnection is experienced as an interplay of emotional and relational state, often arising from subtle strains in communication, support, and personal meaning as experienced among the Filipino participants. The most used codes under Experiences of Disconnection include "Interaction," "Selective Sharing of Self," "Feeling Sad," and "General Feelings of Disconnection (from others)," highlighting how disconnection is deeply felt when relational communication weakens. One participant shared, "It's like, even if I'm around people, I still feel alone. It's not the same as being heard or seen" (ID16), while another said, "I kind of lost interest in messaging or calling. It felt like I was the only one reaching out" (ID24). One participant reflected, "Sometimes, they don't listen, or I don't get the chance to explain. That's when I just stop trying." (ID 10). Disconnection was often accompanied by existential confusion or emotional drift, as ID20 expressed: "I didn't know where I fit in anymore. I kept asking myself, 'What's next? Where do I go from here?'" The code "Isolation" also appeared prominently, showing how both physical and emotional distance deepen disconnection—"I had no one to talk to… it still felt like I was carrying everything on my own" (ID29). "Grief" added another layer, where unresolved loss continued to disrupt connection: "I thought I had moved on… but every year, I realize I haven't" (ID26). These experiences reveal that disconnection is not always loud or confrontational, but often quiet and gradual—emerging through fatigue, silence, and unmet emotional needs. Participants often chose to withdraw or selectively open up as a form of self-preservation, especially when they felt emotionally unsupported. For instance, one participant shared: "I become more withdrawn and prefer solitude. It also leads me to overthink, which distorts my perception—making things seem more negative than they really are." (ID35). In contrast, several codes under Characterization of the Relationship and Characterization of Interaction, including "Emotional Closeness/

Distance," "Group Cohesion," "Termination," "Emotional Connection/Bond," "Relationship as a Burden," "Forced," and "Emotional Depth/Superficiality", were not coded illustrating that disconnection is overwhelmingly understood as an internal psychological experience rather than one defined by explicit group dynamics or social rejection.

Experiences of disconnection differ significantly across the loneliness spectrum. Non-lonely individuals often describe disconnection as brief and situational, typically due to busy schedules or the need for rest, rather than emotional lack (e.g., ID10). They feel in control of their social boundaries and do not perceive these moments as isolating. As ID10 explained, "We're all adults now. We understand that sometimes, we won't talk for a while. But when we do, it's like nothing changed," and added, "Even if we're not physically together, I know they're there." She emphasized that disconnection is simply managed with mutual understanding—"We just send a quick message like, 'Hey, I'm swamped right now,' and we're good." In contrast, moderately lonely individuals maintain active relationships but express emotional restraint, often choosing not to share problems to avoid burdening others (e.g., ID5). They feel supported but not fully understood, leading to subtle, internalized feelings of disconnection. However, this pattern is not universal—ID36, a non-lonely participant, revealed that she is often socially withdrawn beyond her immediate family, rarely sees friends, and said, "I'm usually alone… it's just family now," suggesting a deeper, unspoken sense of disconnection. Similarly, while severely lonely individuals like ID14 describe emotional paralysis and isolation—"I lose all motivation to do even the simplest tasks"—others like ID13 maintain selective support and show emotional control. One participant who has bipolar disorder (ID13) described avoiding emotional disclosure due to fears of being "too intense" or misunderstood. He shared, "Mostly because I have this feeling that even if we're close, my experiences are not relatable for them… I have bipolar… I feel

a lot of things, so if it's happiness or good emotions, I feel it more... Sometimes, if it's about the negative aspects of my feelings, I'm not comfortable talking with people because I can sense how strange and intense the feeling is." While he has a wide network, meaningful interactions are rare, highlighting how psychological barriers can deepen isolation.

How is disconnection understood?

Disconnection for the Filipino participants is typically understood as a diminishing sense of emotional closeness and belonging, and marked less by physical absence or explicit relational events or group breakdowns. This is supported by the coding, where the most used themes under Definition of Disconnection are "General Disconnection or Inability to Connect" and "Isolation / Sense of Being Alone", both located within the Self States cluster. Participants largely described disconnection as a felt absence of emotional presence (ID24, 35, 17, 29, 25, 14). As one participant put it, "Disconnection is the feeling that you're no longer part of other people's world or that they don't care about you anymore." (ID17). Similarly, ID10 described it as "losing connection with other people, feeling out of place, like you don't belong," linking disconnection directly to emotional exclusion. In contrast, the majority of other possible codes under this theme were not used at all. These include "Termination," "Group Cohesion," "Conflicts/Harmony," "Emotional Closeness/Distance," "Not Socializing," "Not Heard/Ignored," "Exclusion," "Relationship as a Burden," "Emotional Depth/Superficiality," and "Feeling Unseen." Their absence suggests that participants did not define disconnection in terms of group problems or communication breakdowns. The absence of coding for "Not Socializing" also indicates that disconnection. is not seen as a lack of interaction alone, but specifically as a loss of emotional connection. One participant shared: "Disconnection, for me, is when I feel out of sync with the people around me—like there's a gap or something missing between us." (ID47). In the Philippines, no participant described disconnection primarily through structural reasons, further reinforcing that disconnection is experienced chiefly as an internal state.

Experiences of loneliness

The experience of loneliness among Filipino participants, based on the inductive coding under Experience of Loneliness, is predominantly characterized by internal states of sadness, isolation, grief, and existential disconnection rather than by overt social isolation. The most frequently used codes include "Isolation / Sense of Being Alone," "Dysfunction," "Grief," and "Activity Engagement / Distractions," highlighting how loneliness is often internally experienced yet externally masked through coping behaviors. However, not all participants mask their loneliness through coping behaviors. For instance, ID14 directly acknowledged the overwhelming presence of loneliness despite efforts to stay functional, stating, "Even when I'm with my partner, the feeling of loneliness doesn't disappear... I still feel entirely alone". Unlike participants who distract themselves with routines or hobbies, this participant openly experiences and verbalizes her emotional state. Similarly, ID13, who has bipolar disorder, discussed being conscious of his intense emotions and often avoids discussing them, not to hide loneliness but due to fear of being misunderstood. He reflected: "I only express my loneliness when it's not manageable". These accounts suggest that while many do use coping behaviors to mask experiences of loneliness, some participants express loneliness directly. Severely lonely individuals, such as ID14, described loneliness as deeply immobilizing: "My isolation has reached a point where I prefer staying in my room all day. I lose all motivation to do even the simplest

tasks, even those I know I should be doing." Moderately lonely individuals reflected more active coping, such as ID44 sharing, "Aside from meditation, reading books also helped me a lot. Every week, I would order books and read them. It was a kind of therapy for me—it helped me feel connected with myself." Others, like ID18, recognized loneliness as a persistent emotional state: "Even when you have people who support you, you still feel unmotivated, unhappy with life, and unsatisfied." Among non-lonely individuals, some framed past loneliness as an opportunity for growth, while several moderately lonely participants also viewed it as transformative. As ID20 shared, "I've gained a new perspective on loneliness. I now see it as something necessary—essential, even. You can't truly appreciate happiness unless you've experienced deep sorrow. And when you finally rise above that loneliness, you develop a deeper sense of gratitude… My perception of loneliness has changed—not because I enjoy it, but because I recognize it as an important part of personal growth and the journey toward genuine happiness." Additionally, ID18 reflected, "That feeling of isolation can either help them become a better person because they gain realizations, or it can make things worse because they dwell too much on their mistakes and negative experiences." Expected codes such as "Lack of Reciprocity," "Exclusion," and "Changes in or Lack of Shared Characteristics" were notably absent, suggesting that Filipino loneliness is defined less by relational rejection and more by inner emotional dislocation.

The physiology of loneliness

The physiology of loneliness, as experienced by the Filipino participants, is most commonly described through emotional distress, such as chest heaviness, headaches, palpitations, fatigue, and disturbances in sleep and appetite (ID1, 42, 11, 49, 14, 3). Many shared feelings of "heaviness in the heart" or "carrying a burden," pointing to how loneliness manifests physically as persistent somatic discomfort. Severe loneliness was associated with stronger symptoms, including emotional numbness, panic attacks, and in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts (ID 11, 15, 3, 27, 13). A unique description surfaced from ID31, who called it a “saudade moment”— “I call it my “saudade” moment. It’s a yearning—a feeling of loneliness. For the past months, it’s a yearning for something that you can’t have, but you don’t really know what that is. It’s definitely something that brings happiness and connection, but I cannot seem to get it. It feels like self-pity … You really feel it in the heart—it’s a little heavy. It’s like you’re carrying it around.” Others described loneliness as an "emptiness" or "absence of peace," reinforcing its deeply internalized impact. Even some non-lonely participants reported fleeting physiological effects like temporary appetite loss or sadness during stressful periods. The Filipino experience of the physiology of loneliness unfolds a continuum from mild, transient discomfort to profound, enduring emotional and physical suffering, depending on the individual's environment and coping resources.

The effects of loneliness

The effects of loneliness among the Filipino participants span across multiple physiological and behavioral manifestations, often reflected as mental health struggles, disrupted routines, and diminished functioning. Loneliness frequently led to symptoms of depression, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and in some cases, suicidal ideation, as reflected in several narratives detailing overwhelming sadness, lack of energy, and hopelessness. In terms of weight and eating, some participants reported appetite loss, irregular eating patterns, or even significant weight changes, including vomiting or near-hospitalization from prolonged distress. Sleeping patterns were also commonly affected, with individuals either oversleeping due to fatigue or suffering from insomnia tied to emotional disturbances. Mood disruptions such as sadness, irritability, and emotional withdrawal were commonly reported, alongside a marked decline in motivation, which impacted participants' ability to perform daily tasks, maintain cleanliness, or attend school/work. Some disclosed physical consequences like headaches, chest heaviness, and body weakness that compounded emotional burdens. Self-harming thoughts were present in severe cases, with several participants admitting to suicidal ideation or feeling unsafe during peak episodes. While direct harm to others was not a dominant theme, emotional disengagement and withdrawal affected interpersonal dynamics. Other consequences included academic decline, impaired concentration, and overall disengagement from social life. These effects varied in duration, ranging from episodic sadness to chronic and severe impairment lasting days to months, underscoring how loneliness can erode psychological and physical well-being over time.

Coping with loneliness

Coping with loneliness among the Filipino participants reveals a diverse range of strategies that span emotional, spiritual, and behavioral domains. Family remains a critical coping source, with several participants relying on emotional support from parents or siblings (e.g., ID 42, 21, 26, 30, 11, 41). Friends and community ties also served as occasional outlets for emotional release or companionship (e.g., ID8, 9, 34, 46, 23). Seeking professional help, such as therapy, was rare and often approached hesitantly. Technology, including passive use like watching series or engaging minimally on social media, was common for stress relief (e.g., ID 14, 3, 28, 13). Religion and spirituality, especially prayer and meditation, were widely cited as accessible, culturally accepted coping mechanisms for emotional regulation (e.g., ID 50, 13, 16, 10, 39). Substance use was notably absent across participants as a coping strategy. Activities like reading, painting, or playing with pets served as passive distractions, while work immersion helped some participants. In broader terms, coping strategies reflected a pattern where emotional expression through family and prayer was preferred, while help-seeking beyond familiar circles remained limited due to cultural norms around self-reliance and emotional restraint.

Factors affecting loneliness

Loneliness among Filipino participants is reported to be shaped by both internal struggles and social disconnection, with most describing it as a feeling of being emotionally unseen despite physical proximity to others. Internally, participants pointed to grief, unmet needs, and feelings of disconnection as recurring factors that led them to withdraw or feel unworthy of connection (e.g., ID12, 3, 12, 30, 19). Some participants shared feeling alone even when surrounded by other people (e.g., ID 41, 34, 33, 34). One participant expressed, "Even though I'm surrounded by people, sometimes I feel like there's no one I can really talk to who understands how I'm feeling." (ID 34).

On the social side, common triggers included physical separation from family, lack of communication, and feeling excluded or ignored by people who were expected to care (e.g. ID 28, 39, 49). When asked about the factors that affects loneliness, one participant shared, “Being alone means maybe you get separated from your family, or if your family breaks apart” (ID45).

Definition of loneliness

The Filipino participants tend to define loneliness through internal emotional states rather than external social conditions. The most frequently used codes under the definition of loneliness are “Isolation/sense of being alone,” “Disconnection from others,” and “Metaphoric” (e.g., ID 44, 17, 17, 11, 10, 18), indicating that loneliness is often described as an internal and deeply personal experience rather than a simple lack of interaction. Some of the participants shared: “Loneliness is an internal state—an overwhelming feeling of emptiness or emotional disconnection.” (ID35). One even described it as, “Loneliness feels like a barrier—it limits my ability to connect with others and even diminishes my capacity to feel positive emotions, both for myself and towards those around me.” (ID 37). Other emotional descriptors, such as “Depression,” “Disappointment,” and “Tiredness,” were also used but less frequently, further emphasizing emotional heaviness without consistently linking it to specific interpersonal causes. The frequent use of “Metaphoric” coding suggests that participants often needed symbolic or poetic language to describe the weight of their experience, underscoring its deeply felt and hard-to-articulate nature.

Interestingly, some moderately lonely participants saw loneliness as meaningful: ID20 said, “You can’t truly appreciate happiness unless you’ve experienced deep sorrow.” A notable negative case emerged in ID44, who

said, “I’m used to being alone… it’s hard for me to feel lonely when I’m by myself,” challenging the assumption that solitude equates to loneliness. This example highlights how some participants have adapted to aloneness in ways that don’t evoke loneliness, reinforcing that loneliness is not always tied to the quantity of social contact. A negative case analysis of all transcripts revealed no participants who defined loneliness purely through external social conditions, confirming that the dominant framing of loneliness as emotionally grounded and subjectively experienced holds true across categories.

The difference between loneliness and solitude

The Filipino participants tend to do make a distinction between loneliness and solitude, with the primary difference hinging on emotional experience and perceived autonomy. The most used code under this is “Choice”, indicating that solitude is often framed as a chosen, empowering state. Codes like “Sense of Peace” and “Satisfaction/Positive Affect” also appeared, supporting this more affirming view of being alone. In contrast, codes such as “Emptiness” were used to describe loneliness, suggesting a felt absence or lack of connection.

Several participants clearly articulated this distinction. ID14, a severely lonely participant, shared: “Yes. For me, disconnection has led me to focus on rebuilding myself. I’ve spent so much of my life prioritizing others that I neglected my own well-being. Now, distancing myself—especially from toxic environments—has actually brought me a sense of relief.” Similarly, ID23 said: “When you feel lonely, you crave peace and quiet and don’t want to hear anything. But when you're content, you can be alone even in a noisy place and still feel fine.” Religion and spirituality also emerged as meaningful resources that shaped the quality of solitude. As ID16 reflected: “I think it was

the time when I was really down, and then I just prayed in my bed. I guess when I released all my worries to God, that's when I felt that despite being alone during that time when I was breaking down, when I said all of it through prayers, even though I was alone, I didn't feel like I was alone in that struggle." These accounts show that solitude, when chosen and spiritually anchored, can offer a profound sense of comfort and clarity—markedly different from the involuntary and painful nature of loneliness.

How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?

Among Filipino participants, lonely individuals are commonly perceived as withdrawn, emotionally burdened, and often misunderstood. Descriptions frequently include observable traits such as being "quiet," "sad," "unmotivated," or "low energy," with some noting visible signs like "blank expressions" or "weight loss." Many also describe loneliness as being masked —individuals may appear cheerful or social, yet feel isolated beneath the surface. As one participant stated, loneliness can be "hidden behind appearances" or "masked by cheerfulness," suggesting that the emotional toll of loneliness is not always visible. Some participants mentioned that lonely individuals may crave constant company or exhibit oversharing behaviors, while others framed them as empathetic or introspective— implying that loneliness fosters heightened emotional awareness. Loneliness was also linked to overthinking, grief, and diminished social functioning, particularly in those who were once highly social but have become withdrawn. A few participants associated loneliness with a "gloomy image," or being perceived as "aloof," while others emphasized how loneliness is often misunderstood as laziness or moodiness.

Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?

The difficulty of speaking about loneliness is perceived by most Filipino participants to be affected by a mix of cultural expectations, emotional vulnerability, and fear of judgment (e.g., ID44, 35, 12, 26, 38). This fear is seen as rooted not only in individual insecurity but also in broader cultural expectations that value emotional resilience and familial strength. As one participant reflected, "I think it's a taboo for a Filipino person because we're perceived as a happy culture or a hospitable, family-oriented culture." (ID15) Shame and fear of burdening others were also salient (e.g., ID 41, 20, 9). One participant expressed, "I found it hard to talk about loneliness because I kept thinking, Why would I feel lonely when I have so many great people around me? But at the same time, I still felt that way. It was difficult to open up because I knew that if I talked about it, some people—especially older ones—would just say it was all in my head. But no matter what, you can't just avoid feeling lonely." (ID18).

Culture-specific aspects of loneliness

Filipino participants described culturally specific aspects of loneliness that reflect social expectations and emotional norms in the Philippines. A recurring pattern is the expectation to always appear cheerful or having the "happy-go-lucky" demeanor (e.g., ID8, 44, 13, 16). One participant noted, "Filipinos often appear cheerful even when sad — a coping mechanism." (ID16). Some also emphasized that the centrality of family in Filipino life can make separation or loss especially painful, with one saying "loneliness is deeper when separated from family due to the cultural value of closeness." (ID 48). Stigma around loneliness was also discussed, particularly in the context of cultural expectations. One participant explained, "Probably because people see loneliness as something everyone experiences… That's

the stigma—since everyone experiences loneliness, you're expected to just suck it up." (ID19). Others pointed to societal norms that discourage visible signs of loneliness, with ID33 stating the "Stigma of being alone in a family-centered culture,". Additionally, another participant emphasized how this is often masked, saying Filipinos "smile through sadness." (ID28).

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness

The response process of most of the participants when asked about the last time they were lonely was rooted in reflective recollection of emotionally significant experiences. A common response process is introspection, as for instance when participants revisited moments tied to personal loss or grief (e.g., ID 43, 13, 26, 12), or thinking about geographically distant relatives (e.g., ID 49, 46, 22, 6, 41). Several participants described non-specific but emotionally charged states such as "It felt heavy," "hollow thoughts" (e.g., ID 40, 38, 16), indicating physiological evidence of loneliness. Additionally, personally impactful event comparison was evident when participants referenced illness in the family or recent bereavements (e.g., ID 47, ID9, 35), underscoring the temporal and emotional triggers for loneliness. Notably, most participants did not describe their loneliness as emerging from direct social conflicts or external events, but from internally processed reflections shaped by emotional significance. These findings suggest that among Filipino participants, loneliness is more often understood through deeply felt personal memories than through present interpersonal conditions.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them

The response process of most participants when asked "What is loneliness?" involved metacognitive reflection rooted in lived emotional experiences. Rather than offering abstract definitions, they drew from personal memories of absence, disconnection, or longing for connection and belonging—illustrating how emotional recall shaped their understanding (e.g., ID 36, 16, 18, 41, 8, 9, 33). For instance, ID36 shared, "Even if they are in my presence… it feels like they aren't really there," while ID18 echoed, "Even if you're surrounded by people, you still feel emotionally disconnected.". Some participants, such as ID20, engaged in affective comparison, stating, "You can't truly appreciate happiness unless you've experienced deep sorrow," showing how understanding loneliness emerged through contrast with other emotional states. This reflective process was often emotionally charged; as ID13 noted, "I felt sad because I had to recall the times when I felt lonely." Across responses, loneliness was not just defined—it was also re-experienced, revealing that metacognition and emotional memory worked together in shaping how participants articulated the concept.

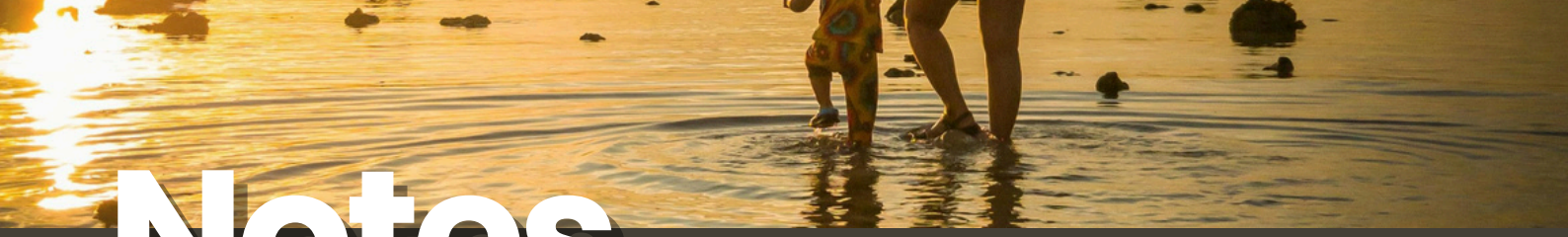
What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them

When reflecting on what makes for a good social connection, many participants engaged in drawing on personal emotional benchmarks and also lived experiences. Their response processes revealed a strong orientation toward self-awareness and social evidence, as they identified traits they value or feel are missing in their current relationships. For instance, ID16 said, "Yes. I think because those are the things I feel are lacking within myself," referring to trust and bonding, while ID10 shared, "I based my answer on experience. Those are the qualities I personally look for in a good connection."

A common pattern emerged where participants' definitions were tied to how they view their current relationships—for example, ID35 said, "I thought about my personal relationships, especially those with my wife and family," while ID17 explained, "Maybe it's about what I feel in the relationships I have with my friends and family." Similarly, ID5 emphasized the lasting value of shared history: "I want my social connections to reflect that… where the past or shared history of bonding is never forgotten."

What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of "I feel lonely" from 0-100

On answering this question, most participants responded based on personal experiences and current emotional circumstances. Non-lonely and moderately lonely individuals generally reported lower scores (1–50), describing their loneliness as occasional or situational. For instance, ID46 shared, "Not often, maybe once a week—only during moments like that, when something reminds me of the past," while ID35 noted, "I rarely experience loneliness. It mainly occurs during stressful periods, such as my surgery or occasionally at night." Others attributed their low scores to having consistent social presence (e.g., 33, 47, 48, 22), who cited being frequently surrounded by loved ones. In contrast, severely lonely participants frequently gave high ratings (80–100), with ID40 and ID14 stating they feel lonely almost every day. Some connected this to unmet emotional needs and a desire for deeper connection, such as ID13, who said, "I feel lonely because I feel like I want to spend more time with the people I care about", with a score of 81/100, and ID15 giving a score of 65/100, who explained feeling the need to foster more meaningful relationships — "I do feel that I deserve more connection than what I have now or I should I should foster more connection, that what I have now.". One participant, ID3, despite having someone to talk to, rated their loneliness at 50/100, noting a fear of judgment: "I rated it 50% because while I look for someone to talk to, I sometimes hesitate, fearing judgment." These responses reflect that the experience of loneliness varies not only by frequency but also by personal context and expectations.



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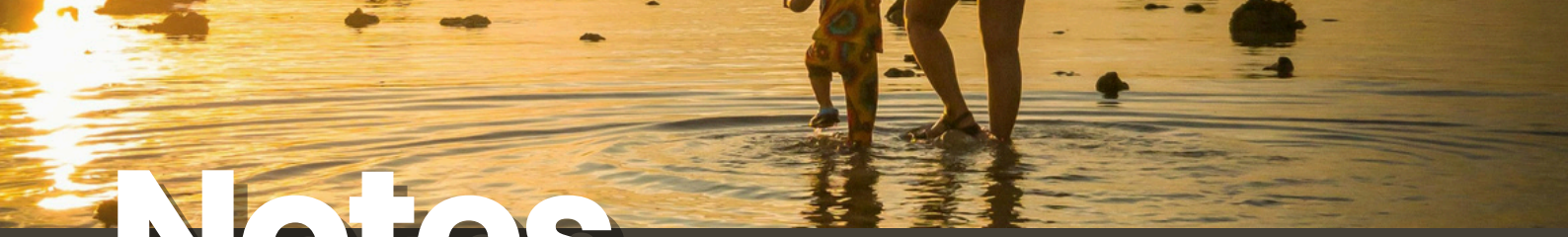

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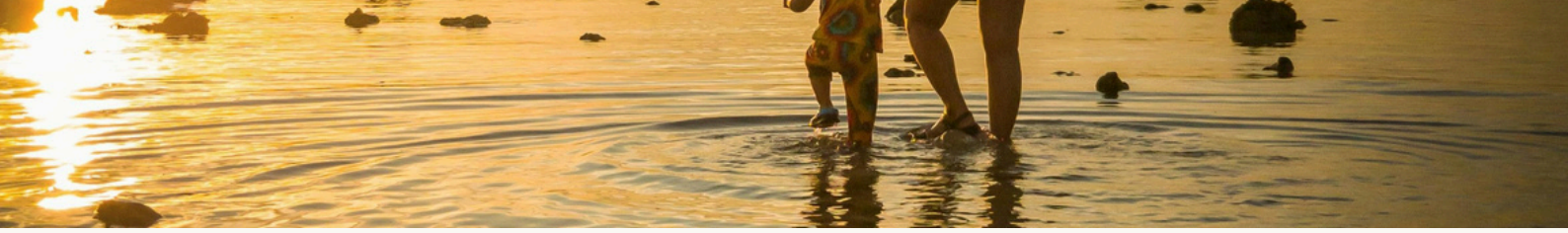

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Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness